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KING LEAR ON THE STAGE

Why is it that *King Lear*, perhaps the most passionate, the noblest, and even the most personal of Shakespeare's works, is, by the verdict of criticism and theatrical experience alike, a poor stage play? This is a question which has received no adequate answer. Yet on the answer to it depends in large measure our decision concerning the mature Shakespeare's attitude toward life and art. Is it, as Swinburne asserts, because *Lear* represents a world of unmitigated blackness, lightened only by the lurid flames of terrible passion or hideous impiety? Is it, as Charles Lamb believed, that the figures in *Lear* are too grand, the emotions too intense and exalted, for visual presentation? Or must we conclude with Professor Bradley that *Lear* is different in its essence from Shakespeare's other tragedies: that it is really a dramatic poem, destined for the study rather than the stage, and intrinsically incapable of acting?

It seems possible to give a decided negative to all these queries, while fully recognizing the peculiar quality in the play which they attempt to explain. The careful study of *King Lear* necessitates no reversal of judgment concerning Shakespeare's relation to the world. Nowhere does the poet point more forcibly the true dramatic moral that "It's wiser being good than bad", that good is its own reward and evil its own punishment. Nor is more than a very dangerous half-truth contained in the criticism which takes *King Lear* as a play apart, a voicing of lyric or philosophic rather than dramatic ideas, a special unveiling of the poet's darkest privacies, to be analyzed like *Samson Agonistes* or the second part of *Faust*, but never, even in thought, to be staged.

Of course *King Lear* leaves on the casual reader a deep impression of gloom. It seems to be in an unusual degree a "personal" work: and it appears never to have lent itself so easily to theatrical presentation as the other great tragedies of Shakespeare. Yet we know that this play was written, like the rest, for acting, and that it was acted, as the Stationers' Register tells us, "before the king's majesty at Whitehall upon St.

Stephen's night at Christmas [Dec. 26, 1606] by his majesty's servants playing usually at the Globe on the Bankside." Study of *King Lear*, moreover, brings out nothing more clearly than the essential unity of Shakespeare's attitude to life, thus setting right the mischievous perversion which would make of the poet's career a kind of April day, a thing of moods and changes, each self-sufficient and thoughtless of the rest—beginning with the gay sunshine of the morning period and extending, through showers, into the blackness of thunder, and then into a dewy serenity of eve, a dramatic fools' paradise of universal reconciliation which takes no heed of the storms passed by but elsewhere raging.

The cause of *King Lear's* relative failure to appeal on our stage is that Shakespeare stands here at odds, not with himself, but with the conventional tragic standards and with the general public's estimate of life. The play suffers, not from excessive grandeur, but, on the contrary, because its most significant situations manifest to us, when visually presented, something less than tragic proportions. *Lear* is one of the boldest examples of the "bürgerliches Trauerspiel", a type always ungrateful to the snobbery of audiences and the conservatism of tragic tradition.

From the time of Aristotle, public opinion has expected of tragedy that it be "an imitation of a worthy or illustrious action, possessing magnitude"; that its main figures be in station or talent, if not in righteousness, the salt of the earth, and that it deign to rest its exalted catastrophe on none but the more stately passions; on those, for instance, which issue in murder or treason, incest or adultery. Many writers have, indeed, protested, like Grillparzer and Ibsen, or like the nameless authors of Elizabethan domestic tragedies, against the more formal part of this demand, and they have made good their right to fit bourgeois characters to aristocratic themes and emotions. In *King Lear* Shakespeare has taken a bolder step. Not only has he chosen to present under the tattered veil of mythical royalty a bourgeois family group; he has even dethroned all the conventional tragic passions and elevated to the highest place in the whole hierarchy of sin his detested petty vice of selfishness. In this play—to the bewilderment of reader or spectator, but

in fullest accord with Shakespeare's final verdict on life—we find the usual concomitants of loftiest tragedy attending as mean and scarce considered handmaids on the central theme of filial undutifulness. In recalling the play we pass almost inattentively the incidents of murder, suicide, adultery, treason, civil discord, war, and torture, to weep over the wounded vanity of a silly old man or shudder at his exposure in a casual storm.

Not till our modern life grows less prolific of unsisterly and undaughterly types, till squabbling and jealous self-seeking cease to be for us facts of universal acceptance and become hideous monstrosities, will it be easy for the spectator to grasp the true moral of *King Lear*. One of the healthiest features of Shakespeare's work is the honest disgust which sordid egoism inspires in him always. In so early and happy a play even as *As You Like It*, "man's ingratitude" appears to him the unkindest and keenest of human ills; and the same loathing deepens as his experience grows broader, till it finds expression in the almost unmixed vileness of Cloten, Caliban, and the other mean figures which go so far to disprove the idea that Shakespeare's last plays preach a spirit of truce and reconciliation with the hateful things of life.

In *King Lear* Shakespeare has attempted, at the darkest period apparently of his career, a tragedy after his own heart, a tragedy of those less erected vices which assuredly the poet believed more loathsome and more ruinous than all the spectacular sins and passions usually treated. The first scene of *King Lear* introduces us to a family party: a selfish old man, whom royal estate has not dignified and age has not made wise, and three inharmonious daughters—two grasping, vulgar, and hypocritical, the third good with a rigid and almost chilling virtue. The poet's purpose is to show that the tragedy of mortal existence grows quite as freely out of such ordinary types and situations as from more abnormal causes. The foundations of this gigantic drama are all matters generally regarded as common-place—events which would hardly have attracted the notice of an Elizabethan ballad-monger or a modern journalist.

Evidently, such a subject, however it might appear to Shakespeare, would not be accepted as tragic by the groundlings

either of his day or our own. Here seems to lie the main difficulty of the play: what Shakespeare conceives to be the essence of tragedy is for the average audience either a trite commonplace of daily life or mere matter for humorous diversion. To give the semblance of tragedy to such a theme, the poet has been driven to an artificial heightening of his effects. To enforce his moral of the beastliness of selfish humanity, he has borrowed from Sidney's *Arcadia* the gruesome story of the blinding of Gloster. Furthermore, in the last two acts, which yet constitute the least affecting part of the play, he has piled high the conventional horrors. The result is both a triumph and a failure. The dullest spectator is indeed cudgelled into seeing that here tragic issues are afoot; but neither he nor the casual reader is likely to see the tragedy where Shakespeare seems to see it clearest: in the self-justifying and speciously reasonable egoism of Goneril and Regan during the first three acts, an egoism which may develop into the open villainy of the final acts, but which is infinitely more dangerous and despicable in its less advanced form.

"Let them anatomize Regan; see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" In these words of Lear we have surely the kernel of the drama—the baffling question of the reason for human inhumanity, the most persistent, apparently, of all the problems which Shakespeare's life experience set his imagination to solve. In *King Lear* the poet has undertaken, if not to read the riddle, at least to state definitely its terms.

There are three pivotal characters in the play: Goneril, Regan, and Lear; and we may regard the work from two points of view. We may consider it roughly as a whole, with particular attention to the last acts, and call it, as Professor Bradley suggests, "The Redemption of King Lear," the optimistic story of an old man's rescue through suffering from a life of intolerent selfishness. Or we may look more particularly at the first half of the drama and call it "The Case of Goneril and Regan." It is this latter aspect, doubtless, which first attracted the poet, and which seems responsible for nearly all the play's difficulties.

Goneril and Regan are always thought monsters of evil, and

so they indubitably appeared to Shakespeare. Yet the spectator who watches them through the first two acts and a half may find it difficult to justify his detestation. Till the beginning of the storm scenes in Act III, worldly reason would even pronounce in favor of the two daughters as opposed to their domineering and vindictive father. The dramatist's purpose, indeed, is to dethrone just this cold reason of the law-court, which freezes the sympathies and apotheosizes self-interest; and no human being can remain dispassionate before Lear's mighty imprecations. Subconsciously, however, any spectator and almost any reader must probably feel with bewilderment the conflict of two standards of judgment: that by which he, as a member of the callous world, condones the uncharity of two mean-spirited, but as yet unsinning daughters; and that other standard which, when expressed in the illogical and frantic curses of Lear, withers and makes ugly the snug complacency of worldly wisdom.

Up to the end of Act II, when Lear, scorning the offer of shelter "for his particular", rushes headlong from Gloster's house to tear his passion to tatters amid the accompaniment of wind, rain, desolation, and the most lurid adventitious heightenings ever devised by poet to elevate senile impatience to the level of tragedy—up to this point there is little doubt that in actual life philistine common sense would side with Goneril and Regan. Even while carried with Lear on the full tide of indignation, the reader can hardly escape the half-sense of his own hypocrisy in condemning so heartily the figures on the stage, while lightly forgiving their counterparts of his acquaintance who are likewise given inches and who take ells in the subordination of their elders and the ordering of their households according to their proper satisfaction. Certainly the short patience of Goneril and Regan must have been severely tried. Kent and Cordelia found Lear's undisputed authority hard to bear; and the task of adjusting his wayward will to another's rule must have been many times more difficult.

"How in one house
Should many people under two commands
Hold amity?" (II, iv, 243 ff.)

Truly, when the one command is Lear's and the other Regan's, the question finds no answer.

For Lear the head and front of Goneril's offending is her effort to reduce the number of his retainers. This is, of course, a breach of contract, and if submissively endured might prove but a beginning for other petty indignities. Yet we must admit that there is good show of justice in the daughter's complaint:—

“Your insolent retinue
Do hourly carp and quarrel, breaking forth
In rank and not-to-be-endured riots.” (I, iv, 121 ff.)

Lear's followers can certainly not have conduced to the quiet of a royal establishment; and the ordinary worldling may feel something of Goneril's impatience against the

“Idle old man,
That still would manage those authorities
That he hath given away,”—

against the self-deposed king, who would shuffle off the pains and responsibilities of monarchy and yet retain the power of making himself with his hundred henchmen a sort of lord of misrule in his daughter's dominion. Of course, the apology for this, as for Lear's other faults, is old age; but this very age which deepens our reverence and pity for the father also excuses to some extent the daughters' attempt to curtail his freedom.

In portraying the relations between the members of this family, tragedy appears to be trespassing on the prescriptive domain of comedy, and is sometimes able to make good its position only by a rather artificial appeal to the emotions. Thus the terrible and beautiful storm scenes in Act III would seem to the coldly logical spectator a dramatic inconsequence, if any spectator could conceivably remain logical under this hurricano of emotion. How does it concern the question of tragic responsibility that the night into which Lear rushes—of his own motion, we should remember—is stormy rather than clear? Yet this storm is the mainspring of the play. It is probably the best-remembered incident in the drama. It is, with the lurid jesting of the fool and the raving of Edgar, the blast furnace that raises the smouldering flames of domestic discord

to the white heat of tragedy. Try to imagine a storm which could make itself heard amid the mental tumult of the third act of *Othello*, and you have a measure of the difference in tension between the two works. In *Othello* and *Macbeth*, the poet has only to guide and keep within decorous limits the flying career of genuinely tragic incident; in *King Lear* we may see him driving with loosened reins, lashing into the swiftness and energy of true tragedy the duller progress of life's commonplace.

Of course, Shakespeare succeeds, and so transcendently that *Lear* arouses deeper and more painful emotions than any of those plays where the tragic matter lay clearer at hand. Yet it is not impossible to detect signs here and there that the tragic mood is being forced. Lear's imprecations upon his daughters can hardly justify themselves before the spectator who forms his opinion entirely by what he sees on the stage. It is very doubtful whether they can be justified at all, except as personal attacks of the poet against that ogre of self-love which the world of his day and of ours refuses to disown. Hardly even the old king's savage words to Cordelia in the first scene are more disproportioned to the offence than is his curse of Goneril in scene iv :—

“Hear, Nature hear! dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful,” etc. (I, iv, 297 ff.)

It is no wonder if, after this truly awful execration, straight from the heart of the poet, the spectator feels that in Goneril all the evil of the world is embodied; but it would be strange if he should not feel vaguely a doubt as to just where this evil has outwardly expressed itself. We must all be somewhat inclined to repeat Albany's bewildered question, “Now, gods that we adore, whereof comes this?” Of no single action, truly; but because she, who to the average one of us might appear not too unlike ourselves, is to Lear, seeing with the poet's eyes, the image of all that is most mean and abhorrent in life.

Far as we may be led in condemnation of Lear's elder daughters, we cannot reasonably approve their father's attitude toward them. It is, indeed, only more just than his treatment of Cordelia in that the darts which the old man's injured vanity

sends blindly forth happen in the one case to strike the guilty, while in the other they fall not much more lightly or with much less provocation upon the innocent. What distortion of justice is involved in his words of Goneril!—

“She hath abated me of half my train ;
Look’d black upon me ; struck me with her tongue,
Most serpent-like, upon the very heart.
All the stor’d vengeance of heaven fall
On her ingrateful top ! Strike her young bones,
You taking airs, with lameness !” (II, iv, 161 ff.)

Regan’s answer, “So will you wish on me, When the rash mood is on,” may be prompted as much by reason as by the consciousness of ill-deserving.

Sometimes Shakespeare’s desire to arouse sympathy with the injured father does not prevent him from treating Lear’s foolish petulance with open irony ; as when the misguided man promises himself that his “kind and comfortable” second daughter shall with her nails flay the “wolvish visage” of the elder (I, iv, 329 ff.) ; or when, at the very end of the second act, we find him still so untutored by adversity as to repeat and parody the foolish love test with which his tragedy began, still playing the one daughter against the other, haggling over the number of his retainers, and mean enough still to turn to the hated and abused Goneril with these words of ineffable weakness :—

“I’ll go with thee :
Thy fifty yet doth double five-and-twenty,
And thou art twice her love.” (II, iv, 261ff.)

Throughout the first half of the play Lear is totally wrong-headed. As Shakespeare’s spokesman he scourges the selfishness of the world, but he deserves and receives an equal scourge for his own. What is his finest speech in Act II but a piece of glorious special pleading, an illegitimate appeal to the emotions, which fails to touch the real issues?—

“You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,
As full of grief as age ; wretched in both !
If it be you that stir these daughters’ hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely ; touch me with noble anger,
And let not woman’s weapons, water-drops,
Stain my man’s cheeks !” (II, iv, 275 ff.)

Nor is there real justice in Lear's ravings in the most exalted scene of the play, where he stands in the storm, surrounded and comforted by the truest followers that man could have, and rails against humanity:—

“And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world!
Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once
That make ingrateful man!” (III, ii, 6 ff.)

The violence of this universal malediction, uttered thus in the Timon vein, tenses the nerves and quickens the emotions of the auditors; but that the poet ever meant it to be taken as a just indictment of the world which contains Kent and Cordelia, the Fool, Edgar, and Gloster, is, of course, unbelievable. The true moral of the play is spoken, not by Lear in any of his diatribes, but by the least admirable of all the characters, by Regan herself, when she says:—

“O, sir, to wilful men,
The injuries that they themselves procure
Must be their schoolmasters.” (II, iv, 305 ff.)

Viewed in its widest significance, the drama is a record of the schooling of Lear's self-love, a record of his cleansing through passion and suffering from the mire of egoism in which he, as well as his two daughters, has been steeped. For the spectator who could see thus far beneath the superficial worldliness and haphazard of the tragedy into the spirit that informs it, all discrepancies would vanish and the chaos of meanness give place to a universe where good is ordered from above, where selfishness and malice become the agents of chastisement and regeneracy. The wrong that Lear does and the wrong that he suffers are both productive in the end of benefit. Even the apparently fatal and inexcusable folly of Lear's conduct to Cordelia becomes an instrument of good to both. For the Cordelia of the last two acts is a much wiser and nobler character than the self-righteous girl who is so forward at the beginning to defy parental authority and convict parental unwisdom. To Lear himself the break with Cordelia becomes the first unwitting step in the way of salvation, for the accomplishment of his original purpose to make his abode with his youngest daughter can hardly have resulted happily for either his character or his

fortunes. Even though we imagine Cordelia many times more angel than the first act shows her, must we not see in Lear's relations with her a prospect of bickerings and disputes leading at length to the old king's angry withdrawal to the jealous elder sisters and a sequel of total alienation, civil war, and ruin?

As it is, the story of Lear's sufferings is the story of his redemption. The first sign of unselfishness which he displays appears when he checks his anger against Cornwall:—

“Tell the hot duke that—
No, but not yet; may be he is not well:
Infirmity doth still neglect all office
Whereto our health is bound; we are not ourselves
When nature, being oppress'd, commands the mind
To suffer with the body. I'll forbear;
And am fallen out with my more headier will,
To take the indispos'd and sickly fit
For the sound man.” (II, iv, 105 ff.)

Generosity shows itself more strongly in the storm scenes in Lear's occasional touches of tender feeling for his followers, and it suddenly bursts over his clouded spirit with the force of a great new discovery in the quick flash of sympathy for the unknown poor:—

“Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O! I have ta'en
Too little care of this.” (III, iv, 28 ff.)

From this point there can be no question of our love for Lear. Our interest in his fate increases through the pathos of the wonderful scene of reconciliation with Cordelia to the august end, where the king has achieved his soul and where the bitter anguish of his last moments adds to his death something of the grace and even the joy of martyrdom.

In spite, then, of its black pictures of meanness and hypocrisy—or even because of these—*King Lear* is a play of good cheer, a powerful witness to the presence and potency in this world of faith, hope, and charity. Only very superficially does it seem to contradict Shakespeare's normal view of life; in reality it is pervaded by the kind of optimism which is most truly characteristic of him—not, of course, the shallow complacency which

would close its eyes to the presence of evil, lulling itself with the siren's motto, "Whatever is, is right", but the strong faith that fiercely and confidently attacks evil where it sees it, knowing that the conflict can produce only greater and purer good.

Throughout this tragedy, so often called a work of darkness and despair, Shakespeare has preached with an emphasis almost melodramatic the necessary failure of wickedness. We have the proposition stated once in the conversation of the two servants after Gloster's blinding :—

Sec. Serv. I'll never care what wickedness I do,
If this man [Cornwall] come to good.

Third Serv. If she live long,
And in the end meet the old course of death,
Women will all turn monsters. (III, vii, 99 ff.)

And pat comes the answer ; for Cornwall has his death already upon him, and Regan lives only to die more shamefully in her moment of success. As if to impress the point, Albany repeats the same idea :—

" If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,
It will come,
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep." (IV, ii, 46 ff.)

And a few lines later, on hearing the news of Cornwall's death, he can say :

" This shows you are above,
You justicers, that these our nether crimes
So speedily can venge ! " (IV, ii, 78 ff.)

The end of the play clinches the moral. Evil has consumed itself and vanished like the shadowy negation that it is, while righteousness, purer and nobler for the late struggle, triumphs in the bright memories of Cordelia and Lear and in the living figures of Kent, Edgar, and Albany. This, surely, is the purest optimism and the truest philosophy. But it is a philosophy which can reveal itself on the stage only to the spectator capable of reading behind the superficial hyperboles of tragic usage a particularly simple and universal story of everyday humanity.

C. F. TUCKER BROOKE.

Yale University.